Module 6: Qualitative Research Methods

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1. Description of ethnography

Ethnographic research has its origins in colonial anthropology and the need of imperial powers to understand their subjects, so as to control them better. There was also an implicit racial bias in portraying colonial cultures as inferior to western cultures. However post-colonial shifts in anthropological research, along with the institutionalization of anthropology in academia, sensitized anthropologists to issues of equity, participation, domination and exploitation, and sensitivity to cultural differences. Despite problems related to representation and interpretation of cultures, ethnographic techniques gained popularity in studying and understanding people in their everyday environments rather than under artificially created research situations.

Ethnographic research attempts to obtain an emic (actor) as well as etic (observer) perspective on phenomena. Techniques and tools in ethnography enable researchers to combine theory and fact gathering, analyze and data collection on the spot, simultaneously. It is research conducted primarily in natural settings, with direct personal engagement with the people and objects to be studied. Understanding any phenomena in its own context is given primacy. Lacking any prior hypothesis, ethnography helps us obtain an insider’s perspective on issues. By using words and observations, and describing people in their natural contexts, it tries to involve people in the research process to a greater extent.

‘Thick description’ in ethnography refers to the identification and interpretation of an observed phenomenon in its own context, the identification of meanings and their significance, thus enabling researchers to grasp an entire culture rather than just an aspect of it. The key advantages of ethnography is the absence of hard and fast rules, the high degree of flexibility, and taking into account the uniqueness of each situation and context. Participation in the setting of those
researched requires rapport building, and recognition of others as equals in the knowledge building process.

The various steps in the research process while doing ethnography are as follows:

A. Selecting a field problem
   - Tackling the problem of access
   - Factoring in one’s own interest in a particular research problem
   - The amount of preparation required
   - Previous field work carried out by self or others

B. Literature Review

C. Language learning (including language / terms relating to one’s research problem)

D. Building rapport to gain acceptance in the field

E. Taking Residence in the field

Choosing a research site depends on a theory one is working with, personal interest, the problem to be taken up, and the issue of familiarity.

Ethnographic research involves collecting three types of data, each of which require specific tools of data collection:

a. Outline of institutions or customs: Document concrete evidence
b. Actualities of social action: ethnographic diary / journal / field notes
c. Narratives, typical utterances, folklore, magic, health: what people say, do, think

The four major qualitative methods of data collection include:

1. Observation
2. Participant Observation
3. Informal Interviews
4. Key Informant Interviews
5. Case Study

2. Major ethnographic methods: data collection, recording, and analysis

A. Observation

Observation is the basic source of human knowledge. In ethnography observation is done of all kinds of action, behaviour and objects with minute detail. Observation can be done of places, objects, persons (performing roles), and activities. ‘Focused Observation’ is of a particular set of things, while ‘Selective Observation’ goes deeper with greater focus into minute details. Observation as a technique is useful under the following conditions:

1. there is no adequate native language exists to explain a process or phenomena or object
2. there is no clear generalized pattern of behaviour; no regularities
3. there is an inability to verbalize certain kinds of behaviour
4. there is an inability to report on behaviour considered not done
5. there is inability to report because of conflict situations
6. there is difficulty in remembering or inability to generalize

B. Participant Observation

Participant observation is field research that is conducted in the time and space of the subjects rather than that of the observer. It is research that involves social interaction between the researcher and informants in the milieu of the latter, during which data are systematically and unobtrusively collected. Participation reduces artificiality, enables breaking down of barriers, makes people behave in a ‘normal’ manner, and the researcher can gather, interpret and record data in the natural setting of the people who are being studied. The strengths of participant observation are as follows:

• Not artificial, not distorting the environment
• Inconspicuous observation
• For some settings, other methods not usable: eg. deviant subcultures, subjects unwilling to talk, unable to verbalize, habits, unfamiliar or disturbing
• Enables us to study large groups at a time: social movements, sporting events, informal groups, prisons
• Immersion: deep understanding
• First hand information
• High face validity
• Simple and inexpensive

Data from observation and participant observation are recorded in the form of field notes that offer details of everything one can remember: setting, characters, specific, concrete, detailed, not just things that appear important to the observer at a particular point of time. In field notes along with recording, brief analysis and interpretations that strike the observer or researcher immediately are also noted down. The ethnographic diary or journal is a memory aid and contains:

• Observation of surroundings
• Observation of ethnographer’s internal states
• Day to day or hour by hour
• Anecdotes, record of places, persons, objects, activities
• Photographs, sketches
• Maps: kinship, land use, season, land use, workspace

Since ethnography is based on an assumption that what is meaningful for actors or subjects can rarely be directly observed, and since what is visible and can be observed has to be interpreted, researchers need to infer meanings, relationships, and connections from data as part of analytical strategies. Interpretation and analysis is to be done by locating and finding the meaning of a particular act, behaviour or phenomena in its own cultural context. Writing therefore becomes very important; a story has been built up constructed using data, concepts, meanings and theories. Since data gathering is unsystematic, and subjective meanings, definitions, and measurements are given importance, interpretation and analysis are to be done carefully and the writing process has to go beyond reporting since connections, inferences, generalizations, theory building, and descriptions of processes are done at the writing stage, even though these may be done at a preliminary level during field work itself.
C. Informal Interviews

In informal interviews, the researcher talks with people in the field casually or informally, without the use of a structured interview guide or questionnaire. Questions are not pre-formulated, and meetings are not usually set up specifically for the purpose of an interview. The researcher has to remember conversations with informants or jot down notes briefly, and then recall and write notes from field work. Informal interviewing usually accompanies participant observation. While in the field as a participant observer, informal interviews are casual conversations one has with people the researcher comes across.

Informal interviewing helps build rapport in the initial stages of field work, and also helps the researcher gain familiarity with the field, and understand issues she or he may be unaware of. Informal interview allow for more free expression since the interview situation is not a formal one, and is part of everyday, common and casual interaction. It is important that details of the informal interviewers are written down at the earliest before they are lost from memory. The analysis of informal interviews may be done using techniques such as narrative analysis, content analysis, on the basis of coding and thematic analysis, or by simple techniques of extracting information and finding relationships between pieces of information.

D. Key informant interviews

Key informants are people who may have special or additional knowledge on a particular topic or issue. A good key informant will be useful in helping a researcher to ask appropriate questions in the clearest and most productive manner. Key informants have a wider knowledge about a topic – the big picture – and hence can formulate connections between different questions and issues otherwise not visible to the researcher. A key informant is a person who is knowledgeable, who is willing to be interviewed. Key informants may be important or influential people, people with a lot of experience, or people who have insights on a particular topic. Choosing key
informants wisely also helps us address problems of representativeness and sampling in qualitative research. However if not properly chosen key informants may be a source of bias.

Interviewing a key informant needs to be done with care. Prior permission is required, as well some preparation. The three steps for interviewing key informants are:

a. Early contact: conducting a pre-interview, getting first impressions, describing and deciding data collection goals, and obtaining permissions

b. Preparation for the interview: selecting topics, formulating questions, ordering questions, deciding appropriateness of topics and questions, and negotiating the form and content of questions

c. The actual interview: the interview is conducted in a site where the respondent feels comfortable, is not intimidated, and feels at home. The interview may be conducted in one or more sessions. If permission is given, the interview may be recorded by note taking or using audio-visual methods.

The following issues need to be kept in mind while conducting key informant interviews:

• setting of the interview
• interviewer strategies
• recognizing cultural differences
• choosing the right informants
• recording the information, and
• reporting the results truthfully and accurately

The analysis of key informant interviews follows the same strategies as outlined earlier for informal interviews.

E. Case Study
Case Study is a method of qualitative research that looks intensely at an individual or small participant pool or an organization or an event, drawing conclusions only in that specific context. We conduct case study to understand life story/ life world of an individual or an organization.

Steps:

Selecting a subject of the case study;

Preparing a checklist which consist a set of questions (who, what, where, why, when and how) focusing on issues;

Data collection through interview, FGD, KII and secondary sources;

Processing and organizing the data (writing the life story of the case).

3. Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research

Reliability refers to the consistency or repeatability of measurement, it is the degree to which an instrument or tool measures the same way each time it is used under the same condition with the same subjects. Because of the nature of qualitative techniques it is not possible to ensure reliability in this sense, since firstly there are no quantitative measures, and secondly the way in which data is gathered does not allow for collecting the same data in the same manner. Repeating tests, and testing for consistency as they are done in statistical analysis is not possible.

Validity refers to whether we actually measured or recorded what we actually wanted to study. It may also refer to the strength of conclusions, inferences or propositions. It involves an assessment of whether we have achieved the best available approximation to the truth or falsity of a given inference, proposition or conclusion.

Reliability and validity continue to be important in qualitative research even as the mechanisms for ensuring high levels of reliability and validity and the meaning of the concepts themselves differ. Concerns about reliability and validity are essentially concerns regarding quality of data and appropriateness of methods used in research. These are concerns regarding trustworthiness, rigor and quality of our data and research findings.
In qualitative research one way of enhancing reliability and validity is through triangulation where we try to obtain the same data or information using multiple methods and from multiple sources. Another is face validity, since the data is collected directly by the researcher and not by an assistant or investigator. Thick description ensures detail as well as context of a piece of information for cross checking and confirmation. Biases and dualism are eliminated as discussed earlier. Possibility of confirming the accuracy and correctness of data on the spot is high.

Problems of validity and reliability usually arise in quantitative research because we also use statistical techniques for establishing causal relationships and for data interpretation. In qualitative research causal explanation is usually in terms of multi-causality and understanding of processes. Questions of reliability also arise generally due to the need to ensure objectivity. But this problem is avoided altogether sometimes even by abandoning objectivity altogether and opting for subjective, sympathetic understanding of phenomena. One key strategy of ensuring that our findings and research objectives are in consonance is to ensure proper operationalization of concepts which is again very different in qualitative research. Rather than fitting the world to our operationalized concepts, we use ‘sensitizing concepts (Blumer) that help us to “retain the uniqueness of the particular instances of a concept” and at the same time also captures “the heterogeneity of the (real) world”. Sensitizing concepts give direction to researchers and alert researchers to important aspects, divergences, and actual incarnations of a particular concept in the real world.